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The New York Times
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The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
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The Chicago Tribune
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Webster Restored Trust In FBI, CIA; Top Judgeship Eluded Him

STAT

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WASHINGTON

WILLIAM H. WEBSTER is likely to enter the history books as a man of iron-clad integrity whom two presidents called upon to restore credibility and professionalism to the nation's top investigative agencies.

In 1978, when President Jimmy Carter was trying to rebuild the Federal Bureau of Investigation after Watergate and J. Edgar Hoover, he turned to the little-known federal judge from St. Louis with a reputation for acumen and integrity.

In 1987, when President Ronald Reagan sought to revamp the Central Intelligence Agency after the Iran-Contra affair and William J. Casey, he too turned to Webster.

In both posts, Webster succeeded in righting the agency, restoring public confidence, cultivating good relations with Congress and injecting a new degree of professionalism.

The tentative judgment from those who have followed Webster's career, is that he succeeded more completely during his eight years at the FBI than his four at the CIA.

At the FBI, he not only restored the agency's integrity but created a modern investigative agency that did a better job in catching white collar criminals, organized crime figures, drug kingpins and spies.

At the CIA, Webster reined in covert operations, but some critics in Congress and the intelligence community say that the agency's performance was mixed. They blame Webster for some intelligence failures during the recent Persian Gulf crisis.

Overall, one remarkable aspect of Webster's career is that he survived 13 years beside the Potomac with his reputation for integrity untarnished.

Webster was born March 6, 1924 and grew up in Webster Groves, Mo., where he attended Webster Groves High School. He went to Amherst College where he was friends with Stansfield Turner, later Carter's CIA director, and Thomas F. Eagleton, the former Democratic senator from Missouri. Eagleton called Webster, then FBI director, "the closest thing to Jack Armstrong, the all-American boy."

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Webster's studies at Amherst were interrupted by Navy service in World War II. After the war, he graduated from Amherst. He got a law degree from Washington University in 1949.

The following year he married Drusilla Lane of Webster Groves; they had two daughters and a son, now grown. Webster served two more years in the Navy during the Korean War, then returned to St. Louis where he began practising law for the firm of Armstrong, Teasdale, Kramer and Vaughan.

After dabbling in Republican politics, he was appointed U.S. Attorney in St. louis, serving from 1959-61. He then returned to Armstrong, Teasdale. Concentrating on business law, he had a key role in establishing the Master Charge system nationwide.

In 1970, President Richard M. Nixon appointed Webster to a federal judgeship in St. Louis. In one case, he ordered substantial improvements in the City Jail, provoking the warden to call him a "do-gooder." In 1973, Nixon elevated Webster to the 8th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals in St. Louis. There he compiled a moderate-to-conservative record. On occasion, he took more liberal positions on civil rights, religious freedom and abortion issues.

Two years later, Webster came close to realizing what friends say is his life-long ambition of serving on the Supreme Court. He was one of six persons seriously considered by President Gerald R. Ford for the seat that went to John Paul Stevens. Carter, a Democrat, brought Webster to Washington to succeed Clarence M. Kelley as head of the FBI. Griffin B. Bell, the Attorney General who recommended Webster, said later that this "straight-arrow . . . patrician" was Carter's best appointment.

In the public eye, Webster was always judicious, serious, and low-key. He smiled easily — a pixie smile one friend called it — and exuded an Ivy League look of distinction. Always polite in social situations, he sometimes displayed a quick temper in the face of incompetence.

Webster tried to avoid Hoover's cult of personality, going so far as to instruct a press aide not to tell reporters personal details, like his favorite dessert. (It's apple pie.) Where Hoover had investigated some reporters, Webster played tennis with them; where Hoover had investigated dissidents, Webster generally barred agents from infiltrating peaceful groups; where Hoover had run an agency with white male agents dressed in white shirts, Webster recruited minorities and women and expanded undercover operations.

One of those undercover operations, ABSCAM, resulted in the conviction of seven congressmen. But it also led to one of the most difficult periods in Webster's tenure with allegations that some of the congressmen were enticed to commit crimes for which they had no predisposition.

In 1984 Drusilla Webster died of an illness that was not diagnosed because she — and Webster — were Christian Scientists. Webster, who had always been active in the Washington social scene, married Lynda Jo Clugston last fall.

President Ronald Reagan asked Webster to move over to the CIA in 1987 after the death of Casey, who had been deeply involved in the Iran-Contra affair. Webster quickly took control of the agency setting up a committee to review covert operations and disciplining seven employees involved in Iran-Contra. But critics in George Bush's White House and Congress said Webster never mastered the foreign policy aspects of the CIA job and was out of the loop at the White House.

Webster leaves government with his ultimate career goal — a seat on the Supreme Court — unfulfilled. His age and lack of support among conservatives make it unlikely he will fulfill it, friends and lawyers agree.

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Chief Justice Warren Burger, left, administering the oath of office to William H. Webster as he became FBI director in 1978. His first wife, the late Drusilla Lane Webster, looks on. AP

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